

Joseph F. Trimmer

## BASIC SKILLS, BASIC WRITING, BASIC RESEARCH

Anyone who studies the history of remediation in American education discovers quickly that the problem is not new. Over one-hundred years ago, Harvard University was recommending remediation to cure the alarming illiteracy of its students. In the subsequent decades, every institution of higher education, regardless of its admissions requirements, has had to confront the problem of the lower one-third, i.e., students, who for one reason or another, could not write as effectively as their peers. Most universities hoped that somehow these students would solve their own problems. Others, recognizing that the university should do something, assigned these students to an outpost known as basic skills, where, after a crash course in grammar, they were declared remediated and pushed into the mainstream.

The more recent history of remediation begins in the 1960s with the growth of community colleges and the advent of open admissions, and reaches its first flowering in the mid-1970s with the creation of comprehensive remedial programs, the formation of the National Association of Developmental Education (1976), and the publication of the work of Mina Shaughnessy. In her 1976 essay for Gary Tate's *Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographic Essays*, Shaughnessy announced that teaching writing to the severely underprepared was the new frontier of the profession (137). The problems exhibited by this new group of students could not be solved by the simplistic drill of basic skills. They required the more complex solutions of basic writing, solutions that emerged from the basic research on language, composing, and learning. These solutions suggested that language should be taught in curriculum that in-

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tegrated speaking, listening, reading, thinking, and writing; that composing should be taught as a complex process of planning, drafting, and revising whole pieces of discourse to an audience for a purpose; and that learning occurred in an environment of trust where students were encouraged to take risks, examine the intelligence of their own mistakes, and develop a sense of authority over their own words.

The message seemed clear. Teachers of basic writing, indeed the whole educational establishment, needed to be reeducated on the subject of remediation. And for awhile the profession seemed to respond. In 1976, Andrea Lunsford reported that 90% of the universities she surveyed had already instituted or were planning to institute remedial English programs ("An Historical"). By 1978, virtually every major publisher had hired a special editor to develop a complete list of basic writing textbooks. And in 1981, Lynn Troyka began her Chair's address to the CCCCs by labeling the 1980s "The Decade of the Non-Traditional Student" (252).

I repeat this familiar history to remind us of the great expectations we once had for basic writing, and to underline, by contrast, the gloomy predictions our current government leaders are making for the future of remediation. Each new issue of *The Chronicle for Higher Education* contains another story of the dismantling of developmental education. The debate focuses on the claims of excellence and access. Legislators argue that we must reform our educational system to produce a more competitive work force. But many express "disdain for remedial programs at the college level, calling them wasteful and ineffective" (Jaschik 20). They recommend that remediation be restricted to secondary education, that colleges tighten their admissions requirements, and that states invest heavily in competency testing.

Those of us who share an enlightened view of basic writing cry "foul!" We argue that our legislators need remediation. Their view of developmental education is ill-informed, their pleas for higher standards shortsighted, and their preoccupation with testing more political than pedagogical. Indeed, we want to insist that teachers, not legislators, are the only authorities who can assess the real possibilities for language learning among basic writers. But before we ascend to the rostrum to begin this debate, we need to know what kind of support we have for our vision. The news from the profession is not good.

This Fall I surveyed all the colleges and universities in the United States to determine the character of their programs in basic writing.<sup>1</sup> My initial tabulation produced a promising consensus. Of those responding, 82% had established some form of basic writing program. 84% of those programs had been created at the instigation of the faculty or the faculty working in collaboration with the administration. 65% of them had been formed in the last twenty years. And 74% of them were housed in the English Department, rather than a skills center.

However, my attempt to tabulate the criteria for selecting basic writers produced considerable confusion. The 900 respondents reported 700 different ways to identify such students. 38% did use a writing

sample, but 57 % relied almost exclusively on objective tests—S.A.T., A.C.T., or T.S.W.E. This data produced two additional kinds of confusion. Those institutions who used their own tests did not correlate their students' scores on local tests and their scores on nationally normed tests. Those institutions who relied on nationally normed tests reported a wide range of cutoff scores. For example, although 50 % of those who used the S.A.T. verbal, reported cutoffs between 300 and 400, 9 % reported scores as high as 500. The same was true of A.C.T., where the scores ranged from 10 to 24, and T.S.W.E., where the scores ranged from 20 to 38.

This confusion can be interpreted in two ways. First, university selection procedures are a matter of historical accident, administrative inertia, and economic expediency. Second, these procedures are the result of considered debate about the distinct nature of the institution's mission, student population, and writing curriculum. There is some evidence to support this second interpretation. Many universities have invested considerable time and money designing placement exams, training essay readers, and correlating testing criteria and writing instruction. But, unfortunately, most of the evidence supports the first interpretation. At most universities, basic writing is still basic skills, an ancillary program that for most administrators, teachers, and students "just doesn't matter."

Andrea Lunsford's description of basic skills courses at the turn of the century still defines most remedial English courses in 1986:

The courses offered no college credit and were clearly punitive in nature. They emphasized mechanical correctness and relied heavily on drills and exercises; ill-prepared students were often thought of as either lazy or stupid or both. . . [and] courses were taught by teachers either totally or largely unprepared to teach writing and uninterested in doing so. ("Politics and Practices" 6-7)

Over 60 % of those responding to my survey indicated that their basic writing course focused on the particles of sentence grammar. 30 % added work on the paragraph. And 10 % indicated that they tried to cover the short essay near the end of the term. But these concepts were hard to fix. For example, one school required a 300-word paragraph while another required a 250-word essay.

Of the faculty who teach this course, 70 % are teaching assistants, part-timers, and non-tenure track instructors. That number is certainly suspect, distorted by the 378 two-year colleges that responded to my survey. At the 522 four-year colleges and universities, virtually all the basic writing teachers are in non-tenure track positions. Only 7 % of the instructors at either type of institution receive any systematic orientation to the special challenges of teaching basic writing. They must face alone what one respondent called the "baptism by fire."

Nowhere is our profession's preference for the old course in basic skills more evident than its choice of textbooks. In his assessment of the new textbooks published for the remedial market, Robert Connors suggests that 95 % of them seemed unaware of the research in basic writing (10).

Most focus on the units of sentence grammar and reduce writing to rule mastery. In fact, Connors reports that almost 60% of the 78 texts he examined were nothing more than workbooks, throwbacks to the old fill-in-the-blanks manuals of bonehead English (21).

In my own attempt to understand this new generation of textbooks, I conducted extensive interviews with the developmental editors at all the major publishing houses.<sup>2</sup> Every editor confessed that publishing for the remedial market was difficult and disheartening. It was difficult because each school was so trapped by the political issues of its own program that it seemed unable to reach any general consensus about the basic writing curriculum. It was disheartening because, despite this apparent diversity, most schools, in the end, made the same kind of choice—a sentence grammar workbook.

All editors pointed out that their list contained a wide range of texts. They published books that focused on the sentence, on the paragraph, and on the whole essay. But when pressed, they admitted that there was no confusion about which books were the most successful.<sup>3</sup> The sentence books were the bestsellers (some selling over 30,000 copies), the paragraph books were marginal winners (a few selling over 15,000 copies), and the whole essay books were, by and large, failures (most selling under 5,000 copies). The one exception to these figures was the crossover text, a whole essay text written for the remedial market but adopted for regular composition courses.

These editors are aware of the basic research on basic writing. They have all read proposals for texts combining speaking and writing, reading and writing, and thinking and writing. When these proposals have been sent out for review, some have garnered rave notices from prominent teachers and scholars throughout the profession. But when they are published, they sit in the warehouse awaiting the shredder. The more innovative the text, the more imminent the disaster. Most of the proposals they see, however, are not innovative. They are copycats of the sentence books they already have on their lists. These editors know what kind of books they should be selling, but they also know what kind of books sell. Their choice is to wash their hands of the whole business, nurse their golden eggs, or hit the road once again in search of the basic writing grail.

These expeditions contribute to their frustrations because they see how their texts are taught. Often they see talented teachers who, in spite of their teaching load, somehow manage to work enthusiastically with hundreds of individual students. For such teachers, textbooks are a supplement; they use their students' own writing as the text. More often they see torpid teachers who, disgruntled by their assignment, simply direct student traffic through their classroom. For them, textbooks are the curriculum; they use the exercises to fill up each hour of instruction. And usually they see the truly zealous teachers who, despite all the evidence to the contrary, firmly believe that teaching grammar is teaching writing. For them, the textbook is the Bible, and they insist that their students memorize every commandment.

In many ways, these truly zealous teachers loom as the most formidable adversary for those who believe in basic writing. Unlike the talented teachers, who see complex solutions to the complex problems of their student writers, the truly zealous provide simple diagnoses and fraudulent cures for the severely underprepared. Unlike the torpid teachers, who do not care what curriculum is taught, the truly zealous argue passionately for manuals that enable them to identify and attack the gross illiteracies in their students' writing. And like the unenlightened legislators, who do not want to deal with the problems of remediation, the truly zealous believe that minimum competency testing will make the problems go away.

When developmental editors return from such expeditions, they often ask one simple question: Why hasn't the basic research on basic writing had more of an impact on remedial English?<sup>24</sup> There are many answers. The research is not known. Remedial English teachers are too overworked to read research even if they knew it existed. The research is not understood. Many of the ideas presented in this research rest on larger theories of language, composing, and learning that these teachers have not studied. The research is not believed. Basic research in basic writing often challenges time-honored truisms about students, teachers, and writing that these teachers prefer to preserve.

The simplest answer, of course, is that given the training, incentives, and political status of these teachers, they see no reason to invest more of themselves than they already have in remedial English. This view also prevails at the Administration Building, where Deans resist investing in labor-intensive courses, and at the State House, where legislators are reluctant to invest in one more compensatory program. Unfortunately, as long as basic writing is defined as basic skills it will not attract investors. If our basic research in basic writing has taught us anything, it has taught us that when we ascend to the rostrum we must redefine the investment plan of legislators, administrators, and colleagues in two ways.

**Pay now or pay later.** This is a version of Mike Rose's argument on social exclusion (539). If we condemn remedial students to basic skills, we deny them full citizenship in the university community. If we don't invest in an enlightened basic writing curriculum that provides opportunities for a meaningful education, we may eventually have to invest in more costly compensatory programs such as welfare or unemployment.

**Pay now and earn later.** This is a version of Mina Shaughnessy's argument on intellectual opportunity ("Some Needed Research" 317-320). If we see the difficulties of basic writers as providing clues to the larger problems of cognitive development, then our teaching and research in remediation becomes the most, not the least, important investment anyone could make in higher education. By paying for such an enlightened program now, we will eventually earn valuable dividends in language, composing, and learning for all the stockholders in American education.

## Appendix A

### Questionnaire on Basic Writing

1. Does your college or university offer courses in basic (i.e., remedial) composition? Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_
2. How long have you offered such courses? At whose instigation were they developed—e.g., faculty, administration, other?
3. Where are these courses “housed”—English Department, Developmental Studies, other?
4. How is the remedial student identified on your campus? Cite specific placement instruments and cutoff scores.
5. How would you characterize the difference between your remedial and regular composition courses. Be as specific as you can as to (a) texts, (b) syllabi, (c) writing assignments, (d) teaching methods.
6. Who teaches your remedial courses—adjuncts, TA's, instructors, professors? Estimate percentages.
7. How does this faculty make decisions—independently, committee of the whole, administrator and staff, other?
8. What kind of special orientation or in-service training do you provide for this faculty?
9. What partnerships has your faculty established with the faculty in other departments concerned with teaching basic students—e.g., study skills, reading, math?
10. Is anyone in your department or university conducting any research on teaching basic writing? Please list: name, phone number, general area of research.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The questionnaire (see Appendix A) was sent to the mailing list of all two-year and four-year colleges provided by the Modern Language Association. The list contains 2,542 names. My 900 replies represent a return of 35.4%.

<sup>2</sup>I conducted these lengthy interviews with the developmental editors at twenty publishing houses. The portrait of the developmental editor is a composite of these individuals.

<sup>3</sup>The sales figures for types of textbooks are an average for all publishers rather than an actual count of individual sales.

<sup>4</sup>Some indication of the significance of this knowledge gap is suggested by Gary Tate's decision to reprint Mina Shaughnessy's 1976 essay, “Basic Writing,” in his 1986 edition of *Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays*. Basic writing teachers still need to read the basic research that was available ten years ago.

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